

AN EXAMINATION OF MODERN EXPRESSIONS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE:  
PERTINENT QUESTIONS AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: An Examination of Modern Expressions of Mindfulness Practice: Pertinent Questions and Potential Pitfalls

This thesis examines relevant questions and potential limitations/risks that arise when mindfulness, a traditional Buddhist religious practice, is implemented within modern Western society.

It begins with an examination of mindfulness practice found within the Buddhist tradition, in particular within the Theravada and Zen schools, and moves on to address modern expressions of secular mindfulness practice found in the West. I survey two prevalent cases: mindfulness in the field of psychotherapy and the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program as examples. This thesis concludes with a discussion of important questions/drawbacks that arise in the modern, Western setting: namely, questions about fundamental cultural biases, teaching qualifications, the religious-secular line, commodification, and underlying company/institution intentions, to name a few. I argue that as the field of mindfulness continues to grow, these questions must be taken into account in order for open dialogue to ultimately result in positive development within the field.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The use of the term “mindfulness,” derived from the Buddhist practice of *sati-patthana*, has proliferated in American society over the past decade, and the health benefits it purports to bring appear to be substantiated by ever-increasing amounts of research. Buddhist-derivative mindfulness-related practices are now taught in the fields of medicine and psychology, as well as at prisons, schools, companies, in the government and even the military.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of papers have been published to date on research demonstrating the connection between mindfulness practices and well-being/enhanced functioning. Studies conclude, for example, that mindfulness practice is linked to improved concentration, efficiency, lower anxiety and stress levels, lower blood pressure and heart rate, a strengthening of the immune system, effectiveness in dealing with depression, relapse, eating disorders, addiction, chronic pain, insomnia, arthritis, ADHD, cancer, and heart disease, to name a few.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is due in no small measure to the abundance of modern research cast in scientific terms that mindfulness has become so closely associated with health and well-being.

However, in the midst of the current “mindfulness boom” arise questions about underlying intentions and authenticity; indeed some argue that certain drawbacks exist that must be addressed for mindfulness practice to develop positively and truly help people. For example, some Buddhists would argue that because the practice of mindfulness arose within the structure of the Buddhist spiritual tradition of over two thousand years, it is becoming tarnished as it is stripped of important traditional complementary practices. Indeed, modern forms of mainstream mindfulness have undeniably taken on altogether new and distinct

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Knickelbine, *Mindfulness on the Battlefield*, Present Moment: Mindfulness Practice and Science, <http://presentmomentmindfulness.com/2013/08/mindfulness-on-the-battlefield/> (April 20, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cullen, *Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Emerging Phenomenon*, Springer Science and Business Media, [http://www.margaretcullen.com/docs/MBI-An\\_Emerging\\_Phenomenon\\_Margaret\\_Cullen.pdf](http://www.margaretcullen.com/docs/MBI-An_Emerging_Phenomenon_Margaret_Cullen.pdf) (April 20, 2014), p. 3.

expressions in the West. There seem to be many reasons for this including a completely different cultural setting, era, and the emerging multi-dimensional dialogue between mindfulness and science. For these reasons, one could argue that it is perfectly natural for altogether new issues and questions to arise within the current context – and that ever-changing expressions within the field of mindfulness will doubtlessly continue to emerge and develop. Examples of these new areas of inquiries include: “Is it ok to take mindfulness practice out of the Buddhist context?” “Who is doing the teaching?” “Is mindfulness simply becoming another commodified product?” And, “What exactly are programs referring to when they use the term ‘mindfulness’?” I believe that making space for these kinds of questions to arise is important as mindfulness becomes increasingly popular and pervasive.

Closely aligned with these concerns, the purpose of this thesis is to simply raise questions relevant to the continued future use and development of mindfulness through an examination of modern expressions of its practice. In order to understand some of the current arguments and to get a sense of mindfulness within its historical context, “Chapter II” looks at the practice of mindfulness within the Buddhist tradition. Because mindfulness practice is diverse within Buddhism, I have narrowed my examination to two examples taken from the Theravada and Zen schools. Once this historical background has been provided, “Chapter III” goes on to examine two prevalent examples of modern mindfulness: 1) integration of mindfulness within the field of psychotherapy and 2) the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program started by Jon Kabat-Zinn. These two samples provide a helpful representation of how mindfulness practice is being used in society today. After considering these examples, “Chapter IV” raises questions and suggests potential pitfalls (some mentioned above) that may lie ahead for the field of mindfulness. Said another way, through this thesis I hope to demonstrate that pertinent and challenging questions must be faced within the sphere of mainstream modern-day mindfulness practice.

### **Thesis Layout:**

**Chapter 2)** Historical Origins of Mindfulness within the Buddhist Tradition

**Chapter 3)** Modern Expressions of Mindfulness Practice

**Chapter 4)** Questions and Potential Pitfalls Concerning Modern Mindfulness Practice

A major reason for choosing to do my Master's thesis on mindfulness originates from the seven-year period I spent living and training as a Rinzai Zen monk in central Japan. My teacher, Shinzan Miyamae Roshi of Gyokuryuji temple in Gifu prefecture was constantly pushing his students to balance time training on the temple grounds with teaching meditation and yoga out in society to our current capacity. He was convinced that this was the highest form of Zen practice and that it benefitted people we associated with - it also brought in money for our monastery, which had recently suffered from a fire. This style of teaching is unique for a Zen master as most monks are usually required to stay on temple grounds the majority of the time. Furthermore, only a minority of temples at large actually hold meditation groups open to the public (lay-Buddhism in Asia is almost entirely devotional). I found this a challenging, enriching practice that forced me to work hard at keeping my Zen practice alive amidst the busy activity of the surrounding town and while interacting with people. Because mindfulness practice is not taught in mainstream Japanese society the same as in the United States (at least not yet), when I finally returned home it was interesting and surprising to witness its prevalence and the fervor behind it. I found myself wanting to learn more about modern forms of mindfulness practice. My aim in writing this paper - aside from the opportunity to research mindfulness from a variety of angles - is to simply offer relevant questions and examine potential problems pertinent to the mainstreaming of mindfulness in American society. So much has happened in the field of mindfulness within the last decade alone that it is exciting to envision the many future routes it might take.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF MINDFULNESS WITHIN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

In order to arrive at a greater understanding of the varieties of mindfulness practice taught in mainstream society today, it is necessary to understand how the term “mindfulness” is applied by them. For this purpose we first need to understand mindfulness practice in its original context, within the Buddhist tradition. Therefore “Chapter 2” examines two expressions of mindfulness practice within Buddhism: those of the Theravada and Zen schools. Indeed, because these two schools have been successfully transplanted and are prevalent in the West today – and therefore influential to contemporary mindfulness teachers - this is an appropriate place to start.

This section focuses on mindfulness practice found within these two traditions. It begins with 1) a survey of the *Sati-patthana Sutra*, the central Nikaya text containing a detailed description of mindfulness practice; we find that it includes many specific objects to practice mindfulness on but that the basic technique of applying mindfulness remains the same. Second, 2) mindfulness practice is addressed within the Theravada tradition. We find the use of similar methods to those described in the *Sati-patthana Sutra* including a strong emphasis on the deliberate, systematic observation and examination of the body and mind (thoughts, sensations, corpses, etc.). Examples of this found today are the practices of the body scan and “noting” of thoughts and sensations prevalent in traditions of Buddhist practice such as *vipassana*. Lastly, 3) this section looks at mindfulness in the Zen tradition. Although less emphasized and identified explicitly – and in a less systematic and analytical way - it is nonetheless present. We see more of a “whole-body approach” to mindfulness practice (in comparison, for example, to the focusing on each thought, sensation, and feeling of the Theravada school) recognizable in teachings directing the student to pay attention, do one thing at a time, and manifest here-now presence.

## The Sati-patthana Sutra – The Classic Text on Mindfulness

The term “mindfulness” (Pali *sati*, Skt. *smirti*) originated within Buddhism thousands of years ago. Often described as “a function or quality of mind,” it is also something that can be “practiced or cultivated.”<sup>3</sup> So mindfulness is a form of practice. It is said the Buddha taught the practice of “right mindfulness” (*samma-sati*) as the seventh component to his well known eight-fold path of awakening.<sup>4</sup> The eight-fold path is seen as analogous to a wheel with eight spokes moving one down the road to spiritual awakening; each of the spokes has an important role in keeping things moving. Although the concept of mindfulness undoubtedly underwent doctrinal development over time the same as other Buddhist teachings, it is helpful to look at its early sources.<sup>5</sup> The *locus classicus* for the Buddha’s early teaching about the practice of right mindfulness is the *Sati-patthana Sutra* (*The Foundations for Mindfulness Sutra*). Here we find a discussion of the four foundations of mindfulness, i.e. the method of correctly applying mindfulness to the body, feelings, the mind, and mental qualities. It is through the practice of mindfulness that insight is acquired and liberation achieved.

The Buddha teaches in the sutra that mindfulness can be applied specifically to different aspects within each category. For example, for the mindfulness of the body section (the first of the four foundations), one can bring mindfulness to 1) his or her breathing: “breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long’”; 2) the body’s position: “when walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking’ ...etc.”; 3) performing daily activities: “when eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring...when urinating and defecating...he makes himself fully alert”; 4) the bodies components: “the monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down...”; 5) the body’s properties: “in this body there is the earth property,

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<sup>3</sup> Tse-fu Kuan, *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Translator), *Nagara Sutta: The City*, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.065.than.html> (April 1, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Kuan, p. 2.

the liquid property, the fire property...”; and 6) the deterioration of a corpse at a charnel ground: “a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons...he applies it to this very body...”<sup>6</sup>

A variety of similarly specific examples are given for the remaining three mindfulness foundations (feelings, the mind, mental qualities), however, the main point boils down to the following:

And what, monks, is right mindfulness?

(i) There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, aware, and mindful—putting away greed and distress with reference to the world.

(ii) He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves—ardent, aware, and mindful—putting away greed and distress with reference to the world.

(iii) He remains focused on the mind in and of itself—ardent, aware, and mindful—putting away greed and distress with reference to the world.

(iv) He remains focused on mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, aware, and mindful—putting away greed and distress with reference to the world.

This, monks, is called right mindfulness.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that, regardless of the object focused upon, through observation and reflection the practitioner begins to understand the ever-changing state inherent in all phenomena. By remaining “focused on the phenomenon of origination and passing away” with regard to these four categories one obtains insight and eventually liberation. The sutra is quite clear that correctly practicing mindfulness “of these four frames of reference...is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain

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<sup>6</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Translator), *Maha-sati-patthana Sutta: The Great Frames of Reference*, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.0.than.html> (April 1, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> *Noble Eightfold Path*, Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight\\_fold\\_path](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight_fold_path) (January 15, 2014).

& distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding.” In other words, it a practice that leads to enlightenment.

Simply put, in the *Sati-patthana Sutra* we find a thorough description of the practice of right mindfulness with regards to the body and mind. This strong emphasis of mindfulness as a crucially central practice is apparent in many Buddhist schools, although in different ways.

## **Mindfulness Practice in the Theravada Tradition**

Because the Theravada tradition (the School of Elders) bases its practice on the Nikaya literature of the Pali canon,<sup>8</sup> it comes as little surprise to see forms of mindfulness practice closely resembling the teachings of the *Sati-patthana Sutra*. We see the same systematic observation and examination of different body and mind phenomena. The *Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification)*, for example, an early work (430CE) written by the monk Buddhaghosa systematizing the Theravada doctrine, contains similar descriptions for carrying out one’s mindfulness practice and acquiring insight. Within are directions for how to practice the mindfulness of death, of the physical body, and of the breathing, among others.<sup>9</sup> “One who wants to develop this should go into solitary retreat and exercise attention wisely in this way...”

More modern examples include the mindfulness practices of scanning the body (Ajahn Chah, for example; 1918-1992) and the practice of “noting” (Mahasi Sayadaw; 1904-1982). The body scan involves passing one’s attention through the body from head to feet and feet to head while remaining mindful of sensations and feelings that arise and pass. One rests his or her attention on these phenomena and observes what happens as well as the flowing nature of the physical body. When heat is felt, say in the chest, the practitioner stays aware of that heat and how it changes in intensity, feeling, and locality. According to Ajahn Chah,

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<sup>8</sup> Valerie J. Roebuck (Translator), *The Dhammapada* (London: Penguin ,2010), pp. xiv-xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> Bhaddantacariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (Colombo:A Semage, 1964), pp. 247, 259, 285.

So the Buddha taught us to scan and examine this body, from the soles of the feet up to the crown of the head and then back down to the feet again. Just take a look at the body. What sort of things do you see? Is there anything intrinsically clean there? Can you find any abiding essence? This whole body is steadily degenerating... look at the body with wisdom and realize it.<sup>10</sup>

The practice of “noting” involves carefully observing thoughts, feelings and sensations in a slightly different way. When one notices thinking, it is immediately labeled “thinking,” if one observes the mind imagining stories, it is simply labeled “imagining.” Sensations and feeling are similarly labeled accordingly (i.e. “stiff,” “hot,” etc.). Likewise, when one is walking, putting something down, or itching, he or she notes “walking,” “putting,” and “itching.”<sup>11</sup> Through these methods of applying mindfulness the practitioner takes the body and mind as objects of awareness in a very deliberate and systematic way. These practices are all very much in line with those found in the *Sati-patthana Sutra*.

Modern Western Theravada religious communities hold true to this tradition of methodological mindfulness practices as well – both in monastic and non-monastic groups. Examples of well-known non-monastic Theravada communities include The Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts (founded by Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Boorstein, and Joseph Goldstein of the Ajahn Chah lineage)<sup>12</sup> and Spirit Rock Meditation Center of northern California (also founded by Jack Kornfield).<sup>13</sup> Another well-known Theravada lineage group is the Vipassana Meditation Organization (founded by S.N. Goenka of the U Ba Khin Theravada lineage).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ajaan Chah, *Our Real Home: A Talk to an Aging Lay Disciple Approaching Death*, trans. Wat Pah Nanachat sangha (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation: basic and progressive stages* (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), pp. 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Insight Meditation Society, <http://dharma.org/> (November 15, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Spirit Rock Meditation Center, <http://www.spiritrock.org/> (November 17, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Vipassana Meditation Organization, <http://www.dhamma.org/en/> (December 2, 2013).



To summarize briefly, mindfulness practice found in the Theravada tradition closely aligns with the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness found in the Nikaya texts, in particular the Sati-patthana Sutra. The approach tends to be deliberate and methodical, where the practitioner systematically observes and examines the conditions of the body and mind in order to acquire insight into universal change. There are many Theravada or Theravada influenced mindfulness communities in the West today and fields completely unrelated to Buddhism that incorporate Theravada mindfulness techniques (medicine, psychology, etc.). The Theravada tradition has undeniably had a formative, foundational impact on the modern-day mindfulness boom.

### **Mindfulness Practice in Zen**

The Zen tradition traces its lineage through the legendary figure, Bodhidharma, who's credited with representing the Zen school through the slogan "a special transmission outside the teachings [the Buddhist scriptures] that does not rely on words and letters."<sup>15</sup> Also attributed to Bodhidharma is the heavy emphasis on directly experiencing awakening; there is an "extraordinary Zen Buddhist effort to evoke an 'awakening' through powerfully direct means."<sup>16</sup> We see a strong tendency towards holistic practice and pouring oneself completely into things.

The *Platform Sutra* and Recorded Saying Literature (Chn. *yulu*, Jpn. *goroku*) can be considered central to the sacred scriptures of the Zen school and stay true to the above principles; words, thinking, and the intellect are rejected in favor of simplicity, naturalness, and just doing things fully. In the *Platform Sutra*, for example, the protagonist and enlightened successor of the Zen lineage, Hui-neng, is depicted as a simple-minded, illiterate woodcutter.<sup>17</sup> It is through the most ordinary

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<sup>15</sup> Steven Heine, Dale Wright, *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Yampolsky (Translator), *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia Press, 1967), pp. 126-127.

tasks that the Way is realized; book-learning is seen as an obstacle for it is during the course of one's daily life that the ongoing practice of "becoming one" with things develops. Hui-neng emphasizes this wholeness in the latter part of the sutra: "the Samadhi of oneness is straightforward mind at all times; walking, staying, sitting, and lying."<sup>18</sup> In Zen monasteries today, too, we see this practice.

This "becoming one" [Jpn. *narikiru*] in particular contexts has two aspects: formal koan training, and the daily activities of monastic life...A monk in practice is told to become one not only with the koan in meditation but with all daily acts. The proper way to chant sutras, to chop vegetables, to sit in meditation is to become the sutra-chanting itself, to become totally the act of chopping, to just sit...more concretely, it means to work with genuineness, without hesitation, with authority, without reifying self on one side and the work on the other side...<sup>19</sup>

Due largely to the above principles and style of the Zen school, it is not surprising to see mindfulness practice expressed in a less methodical and more holistic way than the Theravada tradition (the term "holistic" here is by no means used to connote one practice as higher or superior to another). Rather than the detailed dissection and examination of the phenomena of one's body and mind, we see an emphasis on mindfulness with one's whole being; this total engagement is expressed through themes such as paying attention, becoming one (*narikiru*), doing one thing at a time, and here-now presence (*ima-koko*), to name a few. In the course of following these refrains, the practitioner learns to focus on a particular activity while allowing the arising and passing surrounding body-mind phenomena (thoughts, feelings, situations, etc.) to be "let be" or "let go." Mindfulness practice is to be constantly applied throughout the entire day in this way. The Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this in his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, again re-iterating that it is something central to all times in a practitioner's life: "I'll

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Yampolsky (Translator), *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia Press, 1967), p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Heine, Dale Wright, *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 290-292.

use the term ‘mindfulness’ to refer to keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality. Then one must practice right now in one’s daily life, not only during meditation sessions.”<sup>20</sup>

In line with the Zen principle of rejecting linear thinking, mindfulness practice is usually not explained or described in theoretical terms; it is simple yet somewhat vague in its generalness. One does not typically read about Zen teachers talking directly about “mindfulness practice” or “right mindfulness” – these very concepts are viewed as more mental constructions. Instead, it is short themes about how to practice that are reiterated. Reminding oneself (or being reminded) to, for example, pay attention, to fully do one thing at a time, to be here and now is designed to keep one on track with how to relate to daily activities and situations; it is believed that in this way a person’s day gradually becomes saturated with mindfulness practice.

A well-known art form that personifies this quality of mindfulness is the Japanese tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*). Although it did not arise directly within the Zen monastic setting, its three “founding fathers,” Murata Shuko, Takeno Joo, and Sen no Rikyu, “were all members of the Zen sect...” a fact which has given rise to the “oft-repeated axiom that Zen and tea are one.”<sup>21</sup> The tea ceremony is steeped in Zen principles of simplicity, naturalness, and present moment awareness (mindfulness). Sen no Rikyu’s expression of *wabicha* reflects the Zen take on practice: “Rikyu’s approach to tea appears to have been his devotion to what he conceived as the spiritual basis of *cha-no-yu* in medieval Buddhism...” In Rikyu’s *Namporoku* we find that he had “evidently undergone considerable Zen training”:

In *cha-no-yu* held in a small tea room, it is primarily by means of Buddhism that practice is undertaken and the Way is achieved.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> George Elison, Bardwell Smith, *Warlords, Artists, and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), pp. 205-217.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Varley, Isao Kumakura, *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu* (Honolulu: Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 63.

In a treatise attributed to one of Rikyu's teachers,

First, we fetch water and gather firewood. Then we boil the water and prepare tea. [Nothing more.]

It is during the precious present moment together with a guest, never to be repeated in the same way - the sense of "one time, one meeting" (*ichi-go ichi-e*) - that the tea master pours him or herself into the simple act of just making and serving tea.

Again, we don't typically see the word "mindfulness" used (in the past) with regard to the tea ceremony, but one could argue that it is deeply suffused with it. Cultural activities such as the tea ceremony, calligraphy, flower arrangement, and some Japanese martial arts too, which emphasize mindfulness, are presented as distinctive to Japanese Buddhist-influenced culture, deeply affected by Zen. We do not find the same focus on present moment awareness, total concentration, and doing one thing at a time as a spiritually infused art form in all cultures. Certainly, Japanese cultural activities often include a concrete appreciation for the present moment and fully living it. Specifically, tea ceremony and these other disciplines, which focus on the Buddhist-influenced "Way," what Theodore Ludwig calls the 'do-arts,' or 'arts of the Way,' share in the precision attention or focus on each movement, often within tolerances of millimeters, which is also true of the full range of practices, for example, of Soto Zen Buddhism in Japanese monasteries.

Looking once again through the lens of Zen practice, we find that exact correlates for the term "mindfulness" may not often be used by teachers. However, in its description we again find a consistent resistance to analysis in favor of references to generalized, whole-body and mind practice - again, the refrain that everything one does is mindfulness practice. For example, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rinzai Zen master Torei Enji writes in his treatise *The Undying Lamp of Zen*,

The work of right mindfulness is the unsurpassed practice...in principle and in fact, sitting and walking, right and wrong, action and repose, truth and untruth, in the world and beyond the world, all that's necessary is not losing right mindfulness...Now tell me, what precisely is the principle of right mindfulness? Practicing meditation and cultivating

concentration is the gist of the work, seeing nature and witnessing the Way is the gist of the work, the interlocking of differentiation is the gist of the work, the one road of progressive transcendence is the gist of the work...The Buddhas of all times only realize the gist of the work of right mindfulness; the masters throughout history have only transmitted the gist of the work of right mindfulness.<sup>23</sup>

In more modern times we see increasing use of the term “mindfulness” in modern Western Zen communities. This may be partly due to its growing popularity in mainstream society. The Soto Master Shunryu Suzuki (founder of the San Francisco Zen Center) says this in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970):

The important thing in our understanding is to have a smooth, free-thinking way of observation. We have to think and to observe things without stagnation. We should accept things as they are without difficulty. Our mind should be soft and open enough to understand things as they are. When our thinking is soft, it is called imperturbable thinking. This kind of thinking is always stable. It is called mindfulness. Thinking which is divided in many ways is not true thinking. Concentration should be present in our thinking. This is mindfulness. Whether you have an object or not, your mind should be stable and your mind should not be divided. This is zazen.

...Just to see, and to be ready to see things with our whole mind, is zazen practice. If we are prepared for thinking, there is no need to make an effort to think. This is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is, at the same time, wisdom. By wisdom we do not mean some particular faculty or philosophy. It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom. So wisdom could be various philosophies and teachings, and various kinds of research and studies. But we should not become attached to some particular wisdom, such as that which was taught by Buddha. Wisdom is not something to learn. Wisdom is something which will come out of your mindfulness. So the point is to be ready for observing things, and to be ready for thinking. This is called emptiness of your mind. Emptiness is nothing but the practice of zazen.

Thus, one should fully do things (even thinking) in a straightforward way. It is by practicing mindfulness through attention, presence, and “being ready” that we acquire wisdom.

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<sup>23</sup> Torei Enji, *The Undying Lamp of Zen*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 138.

We find, through this brief survey of mindfulness practice in the Theravada and Zen traditions, that they are different and that the term mindfulness is somewhat multi-faceted. It appears that mindfulness practice in the Theravada school tends toward methodical observation and examination, very much in line with the *Sati-patthana Sutra*, of the body and mind processes. The practitioner consciously observes and examines (or dissects) the body, sensations, feelings, and mind in order to understand their transient nature. On the other hand, the Zen school demonstrates mindfulness practice through a more holistic body-mind approach, in line with its principles and style. This is emphasized in themes such as paying attention, doing one thing at a time, and here-now presence. Indeed, it is uncommon to read about a Zen teacher telling his or her disciples to “practice mindfulness!” - it is largely left unspoken. Moreover, in contrast to the Theravada school which implements the body and mind as the objects of mindfulness, Zen students do not focus on mental states such as desire, ill-will, sloth, etc., nor on sensations in the body and thoughts in the mind. Both traditions incorporate the central Buddhist practice of mindfulness in their own unique ways in order to acquire insight and see into one’s own nature.

There are a few other points I would like to note briefly, as there is not space here to go into these matters in detail. First, whether in the Theravada or Zen, what in the West has often come to be equated with mindfulness practice, seated-meditation in present awareness, is only one sliver of a much larger, more comprehensive set of practices that cover all aspects of life from morning to night. These include bowing, chanting sacred scriptures, listening to Dharma talks, taking and reaffirming vows of renunciation, even specific practices concerning sleeping posture, and frequency, content, and rituals for taking meals. Second, *sati*, mindfulness, whether in Theravada or Zen, is part of a larger framework or worldview in which specific virtues, values, and aims are articulated, including the ultimate goal of *bodhi*, awakening, which is virtually universal across Buddhist traditions, and which involves transcendence of life and death. In Mahayana Buddhism in particular, of which Zen is a part, and components of which are being incorporated into contemporary Theravada, there is the bodhisattva vow, the vow

to bring all sentient beings to liberation and awakening. Further discussion of some of these topics will be taken up later on. Suffice it for now to say that much of this has been stripped away in contemporary Western mindfulness practices, in which mindfulness can be mobilized to win NBA championships (Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, 2000) or kill with greater precision in the military.

### CHAPTER III

#### MODERN EXPRESSIONS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Although firmly arising out of a Buddhist tradition thousands of years old, as shown above, the concept of mindfulness is now being applied in altogether new settings and ways on western soil. From the field of psychology to education, from sports to medicine, politics to nutrition, the application of mindfulness practice has truly become mainstream. It appears that each area in which mindfulness practice is introduced results in distinctive, original expressions tailored to that corresponding field or audience – often with field-specific research arising swiftly in its wake. For example, public school mindfulness programs result in research about the improvements in a child's ability to focus and prolong his or her attention span; military-based mindfulness programs result in research about the positive effects on counteracting PTSD; research about the effectiveness of mindfulness in dealing with pain are measured at programs run through chronic-pain clinics. Indeed, it is becoming challenging to find a setting in which mindfulness practice and its corresponding research are *not* found.

Mainstream examples of mindfulness-based programs differ from mindfulness practice taught historically within the context of the Buddhist religious tradition. One might argue that there are straightforward reasons for this. First and foremost - and needless to say - modern western culture and society are different from the thousand year-old temple-based societies of Asia. Second, the teaching of mindfulness within mainstream society, completely outside of the religious practice environment, is a new phenomenon. Third, there is an unprecedented dialogue happening now between science and spiritual practices. Still other reasons exist - some of which will be addressed later – that some argue support the plausibility of the manifestation of never before encountered expressions in the “field of mindfulness.”

To examine the seemingly countless expressions of modern mindfulness practice is beyond the scope of this thesis; entire books could be (and have been) written on single areas and cases alone. However, for our purposes, it is necessary



to survey some notable examples. To this end, this chapter examines two of the more prominent examples: 1) mindfulness within the field of psychotherapy and 2) the *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program begun by Jon Kabat-Zinn. An examination of these two samples will help us to better understand ways in which the concept and practice of mindfulness is being applied today, and its goals.

### **Case 1: Mindfulness in Psychotherapy**

It was anticipated by some early Buddhist teachers in the West that Buddhism would largely be seen as a psychology of mind (Chogyam Trungpa in 1974).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, some would argue that it isn't surprising for a tradition grounded in self-investigation and analysis such as Buddhism to resonate with the field of psychotherapy. In a similar vein to the early claims of clinical psychoanalysis (e.g. Freud), we have descriptions, such as from the Dalai Lama, that "Buddhist teachings are not a religion, they are a science of mind."<sup>25</sup> Even the Buddha himself compared his teachings to that of a "great physician" (*bhisakko*) administering care to the sick and wounded.

Some contend that although specifically Buddhist approaches to psychology were initially downplayed in the field of psychotherapy, "Buddhist techniques of analytic inquiry into the nature of self that are so relevant for today's psychotherapists" eventually became recognized and integrated. Again, in the words of Mark Epstein, M.D., "as psychotherapy has grown in scope and sophistication over the years, its parallels with Buddhist thought have become ever more apparent."<sup>26</sup> Although one could argue that major similarities exist between the two traditions, themes of Buddhist psychology and mindfulness are now incorporated because they are believed by some to provide *new* perspectives on the human condition as well as

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Collaboration with the Dalai Lama* (Los Angeles: Bantam Book, 2003), p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), p. x.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker: psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 5.

techniques for treating clients that were historically understated or altogether absent in psychotherapy. This incorporation is happening to varying degrees – no uniform standard exists – depending on the therapist. Indeed, factors such as a therapist's approach and background determine the degree to which he or she implements Buddhism and mindfulness in a session.

Much writing exists today about the integration of Buddhism in psychotherapy and entire institutes have been established to spread and further the use of these practices. The Institute of Meditation and Psychotherapy (IMP) based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, runs certification programs in *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, at which they

investigate the application of mindfulness to a wide range of clinical populations and conditions, examine Western and Buddhist perspectives on health and healing, and...practice meditation together. [The IMP is] dedicated to the education and training of mental health professionals...for the purpose of enhancing the therapy relationship, the quality of clinical interventions, and the well-being of the therapist[...]"<sup>27</sup>

Another possible reason for the contemporary use of mindfulness in psychotherapy by some is the influence of books written by Buddhist practitioners who are also psychotherapists. In these writings, therapists recount both their own spiritual journeys of working through personal problems via meditation and psychotherapy; they also outline successful ways in which they believe they are implementing mindfulness and Buddhism into work with their clients.

One could broadly categorize the incorporation of Buddhism within psychotherapy by those therapists who choose to use it in two main ways: 1) overarching Buddhist psychological themes used as a lens for expressing a client's situation – i.e. understanding and communicating a client's situation to him or her within the context of Buddhist conceptions – and 2) the use of mindfulness practice as a specific method for dealing with emotional/behavioral patterns and healing

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<sup>27</sup> The Institute of Meditation and Psychotherapy, <http://www.meditationandpsychotherapy.org/> (February 15, 2014).

past traumas. In this thesis I will be referencing Mark Epstein as an example of a therapist who strongly emphasizes the similarities between Buddhism and psychotherapy (and its efficacy) although later we will be examining contrary opinions.

### *Overarching Buddhist Themes in Buddhist-oriented Psychotherapy*

Examples of overarching Buddhist themes that potentially influence psychotherapy include 1) the belief that human beings possess buddha-nature, a kind of “original goodness,” 2) the belief in constant universal change (including one’s thoughts, feelings, and circumstances), and 3) the view that the self (or “ego”) is a deluded misunderstanding.

1) One common element emphasized by some between psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology is a belief in “the need to include the body as part of a wise psychology.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than viewing the body as an obstacle and something as impure/to be shunned, its wide array of instincts, motivations, feelings, and desires have come to be integrated as the perfect observation ground for understanding the self; a rigorous examination of one’s body is viewed as an opportunity to arrive at a deep understanding of personal tendencies and their ever-changing nature (Buddhist-based impermanence or emptiness). The importance of observing the body and mind was emphasized by Freud and is deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition as well, which considers the human body “exceedingly precious,” karmically difficult to attain in the rounds of reincarnation. Some believe that directly incorporating the body into therapy serves as a platform that one can immediately examine and concentrate on in the present moment. Thus, Jack Kornfield quotes Herman Hesse on this point, writing, “there is no reality except the one contained within us. That is why so many people live such an unreal life. They take the images outside them for reality and never allow the world within the body and mind to reveal itself.”<sup>29</sup> Buddhist-oriented psychology expands and strengthens

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<sup>28</sup> Kornfield, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Kornfield, 115.

this emphasis that some therapists contend is also pre-existing within psychotherapy.

2) Another Buddhist theme that some emphasize in their psychotherapy is the notion of universal change, especially with regards to one's (a client's) body and mind. Whereas classical Freudian psychotherapy has traditionally viewed one's neuroses and desires as something fundamental – something that could be worked with but that still remain a part of oneself – Buddhism emphasizes fluidity within the entire body-mind system; no entities are considered inherently fixed – the “river of feelings” and “storytelling mind” are in a constant state of flux. Freud enunciated the notion that emotions and suppressed baggage could be sublimated by the ego which could be worked with but which would always remain part of one's being. The incorporation by some of the Buddhist-oriented psychological perspective of constant flow and transformation - that “one's thoughts and feelings are not oneself” – alter how a therapist analyzes, diagnoses, and treats a client (i.e. by incorporating mindfulness which observes these things, for example). Some would argue that it presents the client with the possibility of being with and observing/watching feelings so as to ultimately de-identify with them.

3) Interwoven within the Buddhist-oriented theme of constant change is the notion of non-self. The fundamental question of identity is central to Buddhism and is, according to some, becoming important for psychotherapy as well; while historically the field of psychotherapy has always believed that a fixed “self” existed, Buddhism does not. Fundamental questions such as, “Who am I,” so central to Buddhist practice, are now being incorporated by some therapists into their sessions. Epstein acknowledges the understanding of a human being's situation found in Buddhism: “according to Buddhist psychology, narcissism is endemic to the human condition; it is an inevitable...it is the tendency of the developing mind to impose a false coherence on itself, to become infatuated with the *image* of self, to grasp for an identity by identifying with something or with nothing...”<sup>30</sup> However, Buddhist-oriented psychology believes that the sense of self can be understood and

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<sup>30</sup> Epstein, 69.

seen through. Against this background of the theme of non-self, some psychotherapists pose a similar question of identity to their clients – “Who are you really?” – as a way of guiding a client in examining and eventually understanding the mind’s tendency to relate images, thoughts, and feelings as oneself; in this way it is believed that the client gradually begins to see these various notions of self as a misunderstanding. This Buddhist-oriented theme of non-self opens the door wide for insight practices such as mindfulness.

The incorporation of Buddhist themes (in no way limited to those mentioned above) by some psychotherapists would theoretically vary in degree and scope depending on the therapist. These notions, however, represent a sampling of integrated themes that would exert influence on a therapist’s care and could be potentially described in a non-religious context – on strictly psychological terms. Jack Kornfield’s sixteenth principle of Buddhist psychology, for example, is: “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is not. Suffering arises from grasping. Release grasping and be free of suffering”; we see that the integration of Buddhist themes can be expressed in a simply stated, non-religious (but nonetheless Buddhist-influenced) way, devoid of any mystical or spiritual trappings.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, there could also potentially be wholesale borrowing of Buddhist themes, concepts, and terms as well, such as describing a person’s mental/emotional states according to “the wheel of life” (the six major realms of Buddhist cosmology); within the context of the “four noble truths” (the Buddha’s model for suffering and the path out of it); through the lenses of “karma” (the notion of cause and effect of one’s actions and interconnectedness among people/circumstances), “emptiness,” and letting go, among others, as Epstein does. Quotes from spiritual figures such as the Buddha, the Dalai Lama, Sufi poets, and other spiritual figures are also not uncommon in Buddhist-influenced psychotherapy. One overview from *The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy*, for example, quotes Sharon Salzberg (who quotes the Buddha), ““All beings are the owners of their deeds...their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions,

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<sup>31</sup> Kornfield, 243.

not on my wishes for them,” as a way of emphasizing to therapists that helping clients to change their ways will inevitably improve their lives.<sup>32</sup> In general, if Buddhist themes are used by a therapist there are a wide variety of potential ways in which this can happen – both implicitly and explicitly, piece-meal and wholesale. Perhaps therapists who use Buddhist terms verbatim have a substantial background in ongoing Buddhist practice or study; some of them appear to be well versed at explaining a client’s situation and mental/emotional conditions on these terms.

### *Incorporating Mindfulness Practice (Meditation) as Treatment*

These overarching Buddhist themes can form the backdrop for the integration of mindfulness practice in psychotherapy; they are potentially mutually supportive. Mindfulness as a practice of observing one’s emotions, thoughts, etc. would, for example, have little place in a belief system that perceives feelings and thoughts as rigid, stagnant components inherent to a fixed “self.” Buddhist themes such as universal change (which includes one’s body and mind) alongside the notion of an unfixed (self-less), fluid identity would seem to provide a fertile ground for the implementation of mindfulness practice. In Epstein’s book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, he states:

Mindfulness involves awareness of how constantly thoughts, feelings, images, and sensations shift in the mind and body. Rather than promoting a view of self as an entity or as a place with boundaries, the mindfulness practices tend to reveal another dimension of the self-experience, one that has to do with how patterns come together in a temporary and ever-evolving organization...<sup>33</sup>

We can see, then, how some contend that mindfulness and Buddhist-influenced themes could work together from the standpoint of treatment.

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<sup>32</sup> Susan Pollak, *Bringing Compassion and Equanimity into Therapy*, Meditation & Psychotherapy Conference Slides, Harvard Medical School, May 7, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Epstein, 142.

Mindfulness is a principle technique that can be implemented in a Buddhist-influenced psychotherapy session, used as a way of treating patients through bringing conscious awareness to one's emotional and behavioral patterns. Usually a client begins therapy completely at the mercy of personal storms of emotional patterns and difficult memories or traumas; in this unaware state there is little control and often ongoing fantasy which perpetuates the mental stories of suffering. According to Epstein's take on Buddhist-oriented psychotherapy, it is through mindfulness practice that one starts to become aware of "what is happening in the mind and body *as* it is occurring." One essentially takes a step out of the psychological drama and observes it; one gradually begins to notice the patterns (under the guidance of the therapist) and to understand them all as being in flux. Broadly speaking, mindfulness practice can be employed by a client in two ways: 1) within the foundational, *formal* practice of mindfulness-meditation of the body or breath, etc. and 2) through therapist guided mindfulness practice in which the client is invited to bring conscious awareness to thoughts and feelings occurring at the present moment (i.e. during the actual therapy session). Mindfulness practice is not implemented to clients across the board, however. These practices can, for example, have a detrimental effect on patients dealing with psychoses and even some neuroses.

Some contend that beginning clients on the practice of mindfulness of the body or breath is foundational because the body is a relatively solid object on which to rest one's awareness. Through this practice it is believed that a client may also gradually begin to see oneself in a new light, as something more fluid and transient than he or she had previously believed.

The shift from an appetite-based, spatially conceived self preoccupied with a sense of what is lacking to a breath-based, temporally conceived self capable of spontaneity and aliveness is, of course, one that psychotherapy has also come to envision. It is one of the most significant paradigm shifts to have taken root in psychoanalytic

theory in recent years and is one the reasons why the Buddha's message is now so appealing to the therapeutic community.<sup>34</sup>

Once a degree of concentration and comfort with the technique of observing one's body or breath is established it can, according to some, be expanded to include faster moving entities such as feelings, thought patterns, and memories. Additionally, as this formal body-based practice continues, the corresponding calming of the mind can dislodge suppressed memories, traumas, or emotional patterns which present important opportunities for examination as well (often a main reason the client is seeking therapy in the first place), under the watchful eye of the therapist. This preliminary form of mindfulness practice can also be continued at home, as ongoing treatment.

According to those who choose to implement it, a second major expression of mindfulness practice can take place in the presence of the psychotherapist where the client is asked to bring conscious awareness to his or her current mental, emotional, and/or behavioral situations. The client is first guided to *pay attention* to his or her own repeating emotions/memories of the past (or whatever the issue may be) and then taught "*how to be with those very feelings.*" This is called "bare attention" or "choice-less awareness" (a phrase originally coined by the Indian theosophical teacher Krishnamurti)<sup>35</sup> whereby the patient simply observes or impartially watches the arising emotions, mind, and body simply *as they are*. By holding a mirror up to what's happening one creates separation between the person (or awareness) and the feelings – over time it's believed one starts to see that the variety of feelings and impulses are not oneself, a discovery that can be extremely healing. Again, in Epstein's estimation, he emphasizes that, "through bare attention, it is said, the meditator becomes not like the stream but like the bridge with the stream rushing underneath." One is thus coached in a technique that teaches he or she a way out from the perpetual whirl of unhealthy mental states and rumination.

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<sup>34</sup> Epstein, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The Collected Works of J. Krishnamurti* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).



One becomes more accepting of their unique emotional situation and less reactive – he or she begins to understand what is happening in their body-mind and its ever-changing quality.

Another notable application of mindfulness practice emphasized by some within the field of psychotherapy is its implementation by the therapist with regards to him or herself. For example, a strong emphasis of some mindfulness certification workshops is on the importance of a therapist in being present with the client. It's believed by some that the more a therapist can truly "meet" a client and his or her difficulties with acceptance and bare attention, the more healing potential is available. When the therapist is present and not forcing any "treatment" to happen the client is said to feel safer, trusting, and more comfortable with allowing difficult emotions or traumas to surface (this is similar to that pioneered by Carl Rogers in his attitude of 'unconditional positive regard').<sup>36</sup> Through practicing mindfulness, the therapist creates a space whereby suppressed things can be held, acknowledged, and accepted; according to Epstein, often within this space of stillness or silence (which he became familiar with through personal meditation practice) is where hitherto unknown understanding and insights can arise for the client. He believes that the silence and present-moment accepting awareness of the therapist gives the client the courage to delve into the things they are struggling with most. Because the client, it is said, is tuned in to the therapist's mind-state and persona, they would be comparatively less likely to examine their vulnerable areas if the therapist's mind is scattered, judgmental, and full of desires; a client in this situation would be much less likely to share what's happening for them.

The above descriptions of the potential implementation of mindfulness treatment by some psychotherapists serve as a sampling. Indeed, there could theoretically be countless manifestations of caring for patients depending on the style and favored methods of the therapist. The degree to which a therapist who chooses to incorporate mindfulness practices would do so also depends on a therapist's background in mindfulness practice: on the amount of experience with

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<sup>36</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: a therapist's view of psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

certifications or workshops and one's personal practice. Epstein, for example, is a long-term practitioner in the Theravada tradition and would bring a unique expression of mindfulness treatment to his sessions colored by his own personal history, teachers, and opinions. Other therapists with different backgrounds would also likely incorporate Buddhist-oriented notions in different ways.

The combination of Buddhism and psychotherapy is considered by some to be an extremely positive development in the field. Whereas it is said that the tumultuous Western mind can benefit from both meditation and psychotherapy together – rather than meditation alone – there are those who contend that a similar thing can be said about psychotherapy needing meditation.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see later, there are experts in the field with the same Buddhist-psychotherapy background as Epstein who would not so easily agree. In either case, Epstein contends that Freud at one point noted that “even the best therapy can only return us to a state of ‘common unhappiness’” and moves on to discuss the not uncommon situation of people spending decades “swimming in therapy” but not getting anywhere.<sup>38</sup> Mindfulness, he would say, teaches patients *how to be with* their thoughts and feelings which stops the rumination and chasing of seemingly countless emotional and behavioral threads by a therapist; the practice of mindfulness provides the patient with the skill of observing these things rather than delving into and expecting meaning in every little memory or desire. This is presented as a potential way to avoid going around in circles (both by client and therapist) – of getting lost in the “river of feelings” and “storytelling mind.” In addition, the practice of mindfulness – as treatment – is a skill that, once learned, can theoretically be practiced throughout the day. This is different from the Freudian perspective that the benefits of psychoanalysis are primarily realized during the therapeutic hour itself.

Another major contribution to the field, some would argue, are the Buddhist themes mentioned above. Rather than a “ghost in the machine” that manages its neuroses and desires, Buddhism postulates constant change and non-self. The idea

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<sup>37</sup> Epstein, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Epstein, 161.

is that this new perspective empowers clients, giving them a way out of their suffering; through examination from a radically different vantage point he or she gradually begins to dis-identify with his or her thoughts and feelings. In the meantime, mindfulness/meditation also brings certain issues that do need specific analysis to the forefront of the client's – and therapist's - attention. Epstein and others argue that the introduction of mindfulness into the field of psychotherapy is revolutionary: "the meditative practices of bare attention, concentration, mindfulness, and analytic inquiry speak to issues that are at the forefront of contemporary psychodynamic concern..."<sup>39</sup>

However, as hinted at earlier, there may also be serious questions and criticisms. Examples include 1) the opinion that meditation allows people to avoid addressing/taking responsibility for difficult personal issues and past actions, 2) that mindfulness practice is ineffective if done in lieu of a solid underlying intention or value system, and 3) that the unconscious application of Christian beliefs about salvation and other cultural assumptions to Buddhist-based practices makes progress difficult (i.e. the cultural dynamics of an eastern tradition for the Western mind), to name a few. We'll examine some of these questions and concerns in more detail in "Chapter IV" but first let us consider a second expression of modern mindfulness practice.

## **Case 2: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction**

The second example of modern mindfulness practice that I will address here is the 8-week *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) course originated by Jon Kabat-Zinn. MBSR began in the basement of the Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979 as a supplementary treatment for patients with chronic pain and other serious illnesses.<sup>40</sup> Gradually expanding from there, MBSR courses are no longer limited to hospitals and stress clinics but are advertised as being offered to anybody suffering

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<sup>39</sup> Epstein, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Cullen, 3.

from the stress of an illness or an overall stressful life and who wants to learn coping techniques using mindfulness-meditation. According to the mission statement of a New York MBSR collaborative, for example,

Research over the past 32 years indicates that a majority of the people who complete this program report a greater ability to cope more effectively with short and long term stressful situations; an increased ability to relax, lasting decreases in physical and psychological symptoms; reduction in pain levels and enhanced ability to cope with chronic pain and most importantly a greater energy and enthusiasm for life.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, MBSR is advertised - in line with its name - as a program that teaches ways of dealing with various forms of stress through mindfulness practices resulting in greater health and well-being. Many graduates (including founder, Dr. Kabat-Zinn) would no doubt contend, however, that one potentially receives even more.

More than any form of modern mindfulness practice, MBSR courses appear to have spread across the globe with over 18,000 graduates (since 1979) from UMass alone and over 500 MBSR clinics open worldwide. The recent front-page article from *Time Magazine*, "The Mindful Revolution," states that there are now almost 1000 certified MBSR teachers spanning to nearly every state and over thirty countries.<sup>42</sup> In addition to a large number of MBSR courses on the market is a vast array of *Mindfulness-Based Interventions* (MBI's) that have appeared subsequently, many of which owe their inspiration to MBSR. Examples include: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting, SMART in Education/Mindfulness-Based Emotional Balance, Cool Minds™ (for adolescents), A Still Quiet Place (children of all ages), Mindfulness-Based Eating, Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Mindfulness-Based Elder Care, Mindfulness-Based Mental Fitness Training, Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy for Cancer Patients, Mindful Leadership™, Mindful Schools, Mindfulness without Borders, Trauma Sensitive

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<sup>41</sup> *What is MBSR?*, Mindfulness Meditation New York Collaborative, <http://www.mindfulnessmeditationnyc.com/what-is-mbsr> (April 20, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Kate Pickert, "The Art of Being Mindful," *Time*, February 3, 2014, 40.

MBSR for women with PTSD (list from Cullen).<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the majority of today's secular mindfulness-based programs are either MBSR or derivatives in some way of it.

Perhaps because MBSR began within the field of medicine and is closely connected to modern scientific research - considered distinct and separate from religion and spirituality - the programs maintain that they use mindfulness techniques in a strictly non-Buddhist context: "meditation without the Buddhism." These practices are presented as universal, widely researched and validated by science to reduce stress and improve health. Although the Buddhist origins of mindfulness practice are acknowledged it is clearly delineated that MBSR does not contain a Buddhist belief or value system; the practice of mindfulness is used solely as an investigative, scientific technique devoid of spiritual trappings. In his well-known book *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat-Zinn traces MBSR to its roots:

The systematic cultivation of mindfulness has been called the heart of Buddhist meditation. It has flourished over the past 2,500 years in both monastic and secular settings in many Asian countries...Although at this time mindfulness meditation is most commonly taught and practiced within the context of Buddhism, its essence is universal. Mindfulness is basically just a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding. For this reason it can be learned and practiced, as we do in the stress clinic, without appealing to Oriental culture or Buddhist authority to enrich it or authenticate it. Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, Kabat-Zinn also credits the inspiration of MBSR to his own long-term meditation and mindfulness practice within the Theravada, Korean Zen (Son), and other spiritual traditions:

The early papers on MBSR cited not just its Theravada roots (Kornfield 1977; Nyanaponika 1962), but also its Mahayana roots within both the Soto (Suzuki 1970) and Rinzai (Kapleau 1965) Zen traditions (and by

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<sup>43</sup> Cullen, 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living* (New York New York: Dell Publishing, 1990), 12.

lineage, the earlier Chinese and Korean streams), as well as certain currents from the yogic traditions (Thakar 1977) including Vedanta (Nisargadatta 1973), and the teachings of J Krishnamurti (Krishnamurti 1969, 1979) and Ramana Maharshi (Maharshi 1959).<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, although clarifying the origins of mindfulness and personal inspirations for the creation of MBSR, MBSR is presented as lying outside the religious context of Buddhism or any other spiritual tradition; it is presented as secular despite its purported Buddhist origins and considered applicable to all.

In order for one to develop the capacity to deal with stress through mindfulness techniques, the MBSR program encourages students to establish an ongoing daily routine of meditation practice over the course of the eight weeks; “*the most important thing to remember is to practice every day.*”<sup>46</sup> According to MBSR, it is through the process of actually practicing mindfulness-meditation that the individual gains experience in dealing with stress in a healthy way. One gradually learns how to observe stress (to remain centered, relaxed, and aware when feeling stress) and also begins to recognize stress’s many forms as being in constant flux (impermanent). The more someone can do this, it’s said, the less power stress has over them. In order to establish a continuity of practice necessary to developing these skills, MBSR groups meet weekly for two-and-a-half hours to discuss topics related to dealing with stress, anxiety, etc. and to share what’s happening with one’s home practice. The group also meditates together and students continue their practice on a daily basis at home with the help of a guided meditation cd. Therefore, by the completion of the course the student has 56 days of practice under his or her belt and is said to possess a foundational understanding of mindfulness/the knowledge for continued practice. A main goal of MBSR, therefore, is to provide

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<sup>45</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps,” *Contemporary Buddhism* Vol. 12, 2011, 289.

<sup>46</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 141.

students with the skills and experience of working with mindfulness techniques so that one can continue practicing in the future.<sup>47</sup>

Three primary formal mindfulness techniques utilized by MBSR are the body scan, mindfulness of breathing (which can include observing phenomena such as sensations, sounds, thoughts, feelings, or resting in “bare awareness”), and mindful stretching (hatha yoga). The course schedule specifies different practices which are to be done for varying periods of time (daily) at home (typically ranging from 20 minutes to over an hour). Table 1 is an outline of the schedule from page 434 of *Full Catastrophe Living*. Informal practices are also incorporated into one’s daily routine. Examples include being mindful in the midst of daily activities (eating a snack, drinking tea, brushing your teeth, etc.), noting pleasant and unpleasant events each day, and walking meditation.

Table 1. MBSR Schedule

Weeks 1 & 2	Body Scan – 6 days per week, 45 min.	Sitting with awareness of breathing – 10 min.
Weeks 3 & 4	Alternate Body Scan with yoga - 45 min.	Sitting with awareness of breathing – 15-20 min.
Weeks 5 & 6	Sit 30-45 min. alternating with yoga	Begin walking meditation if you haven’t already.
Week 7	Practice 45 min. per day using your choice of methods. Try not to use tapes if you have been using them.	
Week 8	Go back to using the tapes. Do Body Scan at least twice this week.	Continue the sitting and the yoga.

According to MBSR, the above practices are designed to bring conscious attention to the changing situations of the mind and body. In the process of observing the body or breath, for example, one is learning how to focus on

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<sup>47</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 145.

something tangible in the present moment (rather than ruminating on thoughts about the past or future) and at the same time observing their continuous change. As someone develops this focus and begins to understand both the momentary change occurring everywhere (in the body, mind, and in feelings of stress) and the mind's tendency to carry one's attention away, it is contended that dealing with stress becomes easier. One becomes more aware of things that trigger stress and is in a better position to both recognize these triggers and to observe and release feelings of stress when they arise. According to MBSR teachers, as one develops more understanding about these things there is more control; one learns greater acceptance for situations, thoughts, feelings, and pain. By the completion of the course, a main goal is to have "made the practice your own by adapting it to suit your schedule, your body's needs and capabilities, and your personality in terms of which combination of formal and informal techniques you find most effective."<sup>48</sup> One is "better equipped" to deal with stress and to understand thoughts, feelings, and pain. An example of research-based evidence (in this case a comprehensive MBSR literature review) that would serve to support the effectiveness of MBSR cites the 8-week program as "an effective treatment for reducing the stress and anxiety that accompanies daily life and chronic illness."<sup>49</sup>

To summarize briefly, within the structure of MBSR we see a variety of formal and informal mindfulness practices incorporated over the course of an eight-week period. Unsurprisingly, many of these practices are extremely similar to practices traditionally found in the Buddhist tradition: the body scan, mindfulness of breathing, walking meditation, daily mindfulness activities, and yoga, for example. However, the defined purpose of MBSR (designed for a secular, mainstream audience) is to attain greater health and well-being through mindfulness-based, science validated stress reduction skills; it is advertised accordingly. Within the Buddhist tradition these types of aims would be classified as "this-worldly benefits," and later we will see that, within Buddhism, these benefits are secondary to the path

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<sup>48</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 144-145.

<sup>49</sup> Cullen, 3.



of enlightenment or awakening.

Therefore, we see quite different goals between MBSR and traditional Buddhist practice. It is, however, interesting to note that, according to a vast body of modern research, many other positive health benefits and elevated functioning are reported as well – perhaps as an effect of stress-reduction or to a different effect of mindfulness practice (depending on the argument); examples include: improved concentration, efficiency, increased ability to sleep, increased intelligence, slowing down of the aging process, and many others. Many people would take things a step further arguing that MBSR offers much more than “mere stress reduction,” that it is not uncommon for students to experience deep insights into who they really are – spiritual experiences - during the course. According to Cullen, “Through systematic instruction in the four foundations and applications in daily life, as well through daily meditation practice over an 8-week period, many participants taste moments of freedom that profoundly impact their lives.”<sup>50</sup> So perhaps there is an unspoken spiritual element as well. Nevertheless, it is the connection to and validation from *science* and *research* that makes MBSR’s secular approach to mindfulness distinctive.

Although promoted as being taught outside of the framework of the Buddhist tradition, certain attitudes are nevertheless emphasized as being conducive to succeeding with mindfulness practice. In the words of Kabat-Zinn, “The attitude with which you undertake the practice of paying attention...is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind and to relax your body, to concentrate and to see more clearly.” Helpful attitudes advocated by MBSR include: non-judging, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting-go, commitment, self-discipline, and intentionality.<sup>51</sup> So we see that, although *purportedly* not aligned with a particular religious/spiritual belief or value system, certain qualities or attitudes *are* emphasized. It is notable that these attitudes are central to many of the world’s spiritual traditions – in particular, Buddhism.

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<sup>50</sup> Cullen, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 31-46.

MBSR is presented by some as a necessary next step in the natural development of Buddhism – *Modern, American Buddhism* – and there is already the concept of a “MBSR lineage.” One could certainly contend that until now a practitioner (a monk) pursued Buddhism through his or her own faith and direct experience with the practice; nothing was proven. In the midst of the increasing dialogue between mindfulness-meditation and science, however, a renewed expression of secular practice is emerging (there have been earlier examples of ‘scientism’ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). These ancient techniques are now researched widely and shown to result in a vast number of positive changes in the body and mind. The science behind meditation and, for example, the fight/flight response, the sympathetic nervous system, brain wave states, neurological changes to pathways in the brain, decreased heart rate and blood pressure, reaction time, etc. was never addressed by the world’s ancient wisdom traditions for obvious reasons. Presenting mindfulness practice today in the context of its “proven effects” indeed adds a compelling flavor which gives people good reasons to do it. There is a counter-argument to this, of course, which will be presented in “Chapter IV”: that mindfulness practices are becoming tarnished and denatured as they are stripped from their surrounding spiritual context. MBSR - a secular, scientific version to ancient wisdom practices - can be looked at from a variety of viewpoints.

This examination of mindfulness in psychotherapy and MBSR has been presented in order to provide a fundamental understanding of two major forms of modern-day mindfulness practice in the West. There are similarities between the two such as some of the formal practices (mindfulness of the body, breath...) and the fundamental technique of bringing awareness to one’s thoughts, feelings, and impulses (very much in line with what was taught by the Buddha). Both also have similar goals in that they hope to alleviate suffering.

These two expressions also have notable differences. Mindfulness in psychotherapy is performed on a one-to-one basis with a professional therapist often dealing with clients who have deep issues and traumas: “psychotherapists are in the business of alleviating emotional suffering...people are clear about one thing

when they enter therapy – *they want to feel better.*”<sup>52</sup> The client is intimately guided with mindfulness practice and asked to share what is happening during the actual observation/examination process with the therapist. Therapy often consists of a wide array of methods and treatments drawn from the therapist’s pool of clinical knowledge about the client’s condition; this is similar to solving a puzzle, in which the therapist works with one patient at a time until the “case is closed.” Often mindfulness practice, which can be accompanied by a wholesale description of Buddhist themes, takes on the form of resting the “light of awareness” or “bare attention” on vulnerable parts of the body, memories, or experiences in order to aid in their release and acceptance. Psychotherapy can cost hundreds of dollars a session and a therapist has completed years of training and usually has a Master’s or Ph.D. degree.

MBSR, on the other hand, is designed for anyone (perhaps the median is a relatively “healthy” person when compared to psychotherapy) looking for a way to deal with stress and improve their health and well-being; closely affiliated with the field of medicine, it is taught completely outside of the Buddhist context. The course meets once a week for eight weeks and meetings take place in small to medium sized groups of perhaps 10 to 40 people; there is a standard curriculum of weekly topics (sometimes including research about mindfulness) and changing weekly practices. The student is expected to continue his or her practice daily at home for the duration of the course. Although group discussion is encouraged, it is much less personal than in therapy. MBSR courses are typically around 350 to 450 dollars and the teacher has done a certain amount of practice at mindfulness retreats/trainings and received an MBSR teaching certification; the teacher is expected to maintain his or her mindfulness practice.

This brief study of two major modern forms of mindfulness highlights the differences in its expressions. Taught in altogether different settings they attract different people, offer different things, and implement different techniques in different ways (although the range of practices/treatment are indeed considered as

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<sup>52</sup> Christopher Germer, Ronald Siegel, and Paul Fulton, *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013), 3.

falling within the category of “mindfulness”). With this in mind, it would not be irrational to assume that mindfulness practice utilized in, for example, education, sports, politics, or the military (etc.) would result in still altogether unique and different expressions aligned with each’s features and goals; its modern forms are diverse and malleable. Let us keep these ideas in mind as we examine pertinent questions that arise in “Chapter IV.”

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **QUESTIONS AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS CONCERNING MODERN MINDFULNESS PRACTICE**

In the midst of the modern mindfulness boom we see a historically Buddhist-based practice pervading into a wide array of fields and sectors in Western society. Alongside its growing popularity, speed of integration, and a seemingly overabundance of supportive/positive research, however, arise many questions; there are those who argue that there are potential blind spots. “Chapter IV” focuses on raising pertinent questions that I believe are important in order for mindfulness to progress in a positive direction. Although this section is limited to seven categories or points, each could ultimately be taken up separately to comprise a paper on its own. The questions range from broad fundamental cultural concerns to the commodification of mindfulness, from teaching certification to the reliability of current mindfulness research. I believe that by addressing relevant questions and potential pitfalls – by bringing awareness to them – that the field of mindfulness will potentially be in a better place to unfold positively and with better intentions in the West.

#### **Point 1. A Broad Survey of Mindfulness Integration Within the Context of Western Cultural and Ideological Biases**

Challenges arise when mindfulness is incorporated in the West due to deeply entrenched cultural assumptions. These beliefs are often unconsciously superimposed onto imported eastern spiritual traditions and practices, thus resulting in misinterpretations; sometimes certain aspects of a tradition are removed altogether. Some would argue that we see a stark example of this with Buddhism and meditation/mindfulness on Western soil.

Richard Payne presents the modern Western mindset within the light of long-term religious and psychological biases resulting from a variety of historical events and figures. One example he cites is a strong dismissal of ritual in favor of

direct transcendent religious experience. According to Payne, views from the Protestant Reformation combine with Comteian and Freudian thought to create the modern mindset that any ritual practice (seen as a “middle man”) used between an individual and direct religious experience (God) is artificial and empty of meaning. According to Erasmus, a founding figure of the Reformation, ritualistic practices “made the individual feel that he was religious, when in truth he was merely carrying out a formal observance.” Freud also strongly criticized the use of ritual within religion linking it to obsessive-compulsive behavior, magic, and a form of wish-fulfillment. Payne argues that a pervasive anti-ritual sentiment – and, more importantly, of the physical body itself – has carried down to modern times and formed the context for the representation of Buddhism as being against ritual.

The ideological themes of rejecting ritual for doctrine (assumed as pertaining to the level of the mind) and emphasizing the separation of the physical and spiritual (spiritual being mind-centered and superior, also based, according to Payne, in the Reformation) have paved the way for another widespread representation of Buddhism: as being “psychologized and therapeutic.” The fact that Buddhism is largely represented as a psychology derives from the West’s historically entrenched view of the self as the contents of one’s mind - thoughts, feelings, experiences, etc. – and is also in line with the assumption that the mental/spiritual side of a human being is most significant. “The psychological character of our contemporary society” has influenced modern writers about Buddhism to represent it in this way at the expense of its other components.<sup>53</sup> An extension to this depiction is that meditation and mindfulness have become, according to Payne, characterized as a “context-neutral mental technology” that can be applied “as is” in any setting - as a tradition-less, rational, scientific practice.

Essentially Payne is arguing that Buddhism and mindfulness/meditation have been represented according to Western biases characterized through the lens of an anti-ritual, anti-body stance that assumes a body/mind divide in which the

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Payne, “The Anti-Ritual Stance of Buddhist Modernism and Psychotherapy,” a paper delivered at Deep Listening and Deep Hearing: Buddhism and Psychotherapy across Cultures, a conference at the University of Oregon, 2006.

mental/spiritual realm is judged superior. These emphases have led largely to the portrayal of Buddhism as a psychology in which meditation and mindfulness can be applied invariably as context-neutral scientific techniques.

With these assumed psychological and ideological views forming the backdrop against which a new tradition is introduced, Payne argues that misrepresentation is inevitable. Rather than the “complete” Buddhist tradition being received – it’s psychology, doctrine, practices, rituals, moral framework, and more - pieces are left out, rationalized away as unimportant, or misinterpreted to fall in line with Western ideology. One major example is how Buddhist mindfulness or meditation practices are seen as tradition-neutral and can be applied within, for example, Christianity, or simply on its own in a secular environment with positive results. This view dismisses an entire collection of specifically designed complementary practices, a surrounding moral framework, and most importantly, a complex underlying Buddhist philosophy centered around non-self, impermanence, suffering, dependent origination, emptiness, and compassion that make the possibility for the Buddhist goal of awakening achievable (For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, see below in “Point 2”).

Especially when the deeply held psychological assumption that human beings possess an ego underlies meditation or mindfulness practice (in lieu of “the rest” of Buddhism), things can go in a direction opposed to the tradition’s original intentions. As Jack Engler has shown, an ordinary person possessing the deeply, culturally embedded Western ego-centered mentality, which assumes a subject/object duality, is apt to unconsciously use meditation/mindfulness as a “tool” to actually strengthen the ego (or simply as an idealized means to “self betterment”). This mentality runs counter to the Buddhist aim of liberation from the false sense of self. The common Western ego-based heroic mentality, which seeks to “conquer oneself” or to “get something out of a practice,” also strengthens the dualistic view of self and other as well and can lead to burn out and frustration. Because our culture is intensely psychological, meditation and mindfulness removed from their origins and applied without discretion and context makes progress – in the Buddhist sense - difficult.

Jack Engler addresses other problematic tendencies that can arise when Westerners practice mindfulness/meditation. One main example is the tendency for people to view meditation/mindfulness as a blissful panacea that will miraculously purify all “bad stuff” that one carries – one’s troubling thoughts, emotional patterns, fears, and the like. This assumption can easily go hand in hand with the underlying desire to avoid facing one’s personal issues and history, to unconsciously ignore or get away from these parts of oneself. Engler argues that meditation/mindfulness practice approached in this way (usually unknowingly) can serve to “shore up the ego” rather than assisting in perceiving it correctly: “there’s no way to practice meditation or any spiritual path that is immune from the anxieties, needs, belief structures, emotional patterns, or dynamics of our own personal history and our own character.”<sup>54</sup> This means that regardless of how blissful one feels on the cushion, upon returning to daily life the same problems and neuroses remain; no genuine self-transformation has occurred.

Jack Kornfield refers to undertaking meditation/mindfulness practice in this misinformed way as the “spiritual bypass.” Whereas the propensity exists to keep the difficult parts of oneself “in the shadows” – or out of sight and out of mind – it is actually the long, arduous process of accepting and integrating one’s whole being that is important to life-change. In other words, according to Engler, “we continue to find that many of these personal issues aren’t healed simply by more meditation or other forms of spiritual practice alone.”<sup>55</sup> Noticing this on one’s own is not easy to do; we’re quick to get caught up in our mental content. Often it takes the guidance of an advanced spiritual teacher and a willingness to undergo other forms of therapy to truly change. This common inclination, namely to enter into mindfulness/meditation practice with the intention of personal transformation but not truly wanting to face our “baggage,” is an important issue to keep in mind.

This brief survey of questions that arise when mindfulness and meditation are transplanted into an environment filled with Western cultural preconceptions

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<sup>54</sup> Jack Engler, “Promises and Perils of the Spiritual Path,” in Mark Unno ed., *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2006), 19.

<sup>55</sup> Engler, 23.



suggests that there are many layers to the problem that need to be unearthed. Most notably, we see biased representation and Western attitudes that affect an Eastern practice. One could no doubt come up with other cultural considerations currently influencing the modern implementation of mindfulness, but for the purposes of this thesis simply suggesting the few potential drawbacks listed above makes the point: it is a broad category filled with complex questions. A overarching question, then, is how the field of mindfulness is continually affected by this wide array of cultural assumptions and how it can meet these challenges. There is one last related issue of how interpreting mindfulness as context-neutral can be problematic.

## **Point 2. Continued - Does “Stripping” Mindfulness from Its Original Buddhist Context Present Problems?**

Alongside broader cultural integration questions are more specific issues about morality and complementary practices that arise when mindfulness is taken from its fundamental Buddhist framework. In addition to the possibility for misinterpretation mentioned above, mindfulness incorporated in modern America potentially represents a ‘cherry-pick’ approach that seriously distorts or dilutes Buddhist teachings and goals. Earlier we examined the practice of “right mindfulness” as one of eight spokes contained within the Buddhist Eight-fold Path to awakening; all eight are central and necessary for the wheel to turn smoothly. There are also the Three Learnings of morality, concentration, and wisdom that are said to function together in establishing a solid foundation for the Buddhist path. However, many modern mindfulness-based expressions are devoted solely to mindfulness practice devoid of any emphasis on other components (such as a supporting moral framework). David Loy contends in his article on *McMindfulness*,

Mindfulness, as understood and practiced within the Buddhist tradition, is not merely an ethically-neutral technique for reducing stress and improving concentration. Rather, mindfulness is a *distinct quality of attention* that is dependent upon and influenced by many other factors: the nature of our thoughts, speech and actions; our

way of making a living; and our efforts to avoid unwholesome and unskillful behaviors, while developing those that are conducive to wise action, social harmony, and compassion.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the case can be made that mindfulness practice is deeply woven into and supported by a variety of factors. “Mindfulness,” as a Buddhist-based term of translation derived from *sati*, only coheres within a moral framework and code of conduct.

One underlying issue at work here is the alternative goals of Buddhism and many expressions of modern mindfulness. Whereas the Buddhist tradition aims for awakening, the liberation from suffering *as an existential condition*, through the realization of non-self, the goal of MBSR and other MBI’s is generally to improve health and well-being. Although the aim of the latter might be viewed as settling for a “lesser goal” in some regards (what Buddhism calls “this worldly benefits”), nevertheless, the question remains: even when simply aiming for health-related benefits, does this mean that mindfulness practice should be implemented outside a surrounding moral framework? The Buddha himself, for example, clearly delineated between “right mindfulness” and “wrong mindfulness” (for instance, the focus and concentration that an assassin possesses to achieve his or her goal) and ultimately believed that it is one’s underlying intentions that differentiate the two. Some modern Buddhist teachers, too, no doubt contend that improvement in one’s own mindfulness and meditation practice itself is directly tied to a moral life. Jack Kornfield highlights the connection between the turbulence of the mind and one’s deeds in emphasizing that “it’s hard to meditate after a day of killing and stealing.” Similarly, Cullen writes:

Although the brain science has yet to discover why, this tradition nonetheless declares, based entirely on mindfulness and its phenomenological investigations, that when the mind is engaged in an act of harming it is not capable of mindfulness. There can be heightened attention, concentration, and energy when a sniper takes a bead on his target, for example, but as long as the intention is situated

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<sup>56</sup> David Loy and Ron Purser, “Beyond McMindfulness,” *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness\\_b\\_3519289.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html) (July, 7, 2013).

in a context of taking life, it will always be under the sway of hatred, delusion, wrong view (ditthi, 19), or some other of the unwholesome factors. Just as a tree removed from the forest is no longer a tree but a piece of lumber, so also the caring attentiveness of mindfulness, extracted from its matrix of wholesome co-arising factors, degenerates into mere attention (Olendzki 2008).<sup>57</sup>

So, the question of whether a lack of an underlying moral framework and complementary practices in modern expressions of mindfulness hampers its effects is important to keep in mind. As touched on earlier, many programs seem to be very up-front about this. MBSR, for example, clearly states that its courses teach “meditation without the Buddhism.”

A somewhat related counter-argument that some would no doubt raise is that perhaps there *is* an understood emphasis on morality or an underlying value-system inherent in some mindfulness-based programs; perhaps the course material and teaching reflects traces of these elements. We mentioned earlier, for example, about conducive attitudes emphasized within MBSR in “Part 3,” and how often teachers indeed do have a background in Buddhist practice and at least implicitly import some of its ethical framework. In psychotherapy as well, therapists would not generally encourage a patient to lead an immoral life filled with unwholesome actions.

Regardless of this and more relevant to this paper, however, remains the heavy emphasis and blatant borrowing of a single practice from a balanced and multi-faceted Buddhist tradition. Kabat-Zinn, speaking directly to this concern, states,

The intention and approach behind MBSR were never meant to exploit, fragment, or decontextualize the dharma, but rather to re-contextualize it within the frameworks of science, medicine (including psychiatry and psychology), and healthcare so that it would be maximally useful to people who could not hear it or enter into it through the more traditional dharma gates, whether they were doctors or medical patients, hospital administrators, or insurance companies.

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<sup>57</sup> Cullen, 5.

The question, then, becomes whether there are drawbacks to the approach of the fragmentation of Asian Buddhist practices within the re-contextualization of mindfulness in contemporary America. What are the possibilities and pitfalls for the selective appropriation of religious practices across cultures? What are the ramifications of the lack of an explicit moral framework as well as lack of a thoroughly articulated psychological and philosophical framework?

Thus, there are at least three implicit agendas within MBSR that potentially stand in tension with one another: as a practice presented as scientific and value neutral; as a secularized form of Buddhist practice that emphasizes its this-worldly (ego) benefits; and as a partial appropriation of Eastern practices in commodified form.

### **Point 3. What Happens When “Spiritual Experiences” Arise for a Client/Student in Their Secular Mindfulness Practice?**

Corollary to the notion of practicing secular mindfulness for strictly health benefits is the question of how to deal with religious experiences if and when they arise in such an environment. After all, Buddhist mindfulness was originally designed to transform a person’s way of life; along the way a wide range of experiences can arise. According to many schools of Buddhism, these can include blissful and beautiful experiences as well as dark and terrifying ones. Buddhist spiritual practices inevitably involve a “cutting through” of one’s previously held assumptions about self and reality, a process that many would contend is not always easy and straightforward.

The point, then, is that the possibility exists for someone utilizing mindfulness practice for “secular purposes,” such as for better understanding and accepting one’s past (in psychotherapy) or to reduce stress (in MBI’s), to get more than he or she bargained for. Indeed, it may be impossible to guarantee that client/student experiences remain restricted to the realm of “secular” mental and

physical health frontiers – especially when the practice was originally designed to induce religious experience.

Religious experiences (both pleasant and unpleasant) are an expected and well mapped-out phenomenon within Buddhism, an indication that things are beginning to shift in a student's consciousness and that further spiritual practice is needed. Buddhist teachers would contend that these experiences are ultimately positive because they involve "breaking out" of one's limited, deluded views. However, for someone not expecting, understanding, or wanting anything to do with them, it can be another story. Because these experiences can be frightening and disintegrative, many would contend that it is important to have a supportive environment and thoroughly experienced teachers around the student/client. Traditionally this was seen as one of the primary functions of a religious teacher. If and when these experiences begin to manifest it is essential to be in the presence of someone who has navigated the same territory and can guide the student wisely. This ability, many would argue, comes from intense, long-term practice and is unusual – on a whole other level than the ordinary knowledge of a caring therapist or modern mindfulness teacher. In a Zen temple, for example, the Zen master (*roshi*) is considered someone who has passed through a great deal of difficult spiritual practice (years or decades) and has considerable experience in dealing with his or her own emotional baggage; he or she is then regarded as an expert at navigating a disciple through his or her own difficulties.

Are there trainings in place to educate a teacher/therapist about these situations so that they can feel confident helping someone going through it? Can the mindfulness teacher or therapist who may not have had equivalent experiences know how to a) help the person in the immediate moment of the powerful experience and b) guide the person towards an appropriate next step? Religious experiences can have long-lasting consequences requiring extended guidance. Again, the question becomes whether the therapist/ mindfulness teacher, who may or may not have a solid personal mindfulness foundation with similar experiences, is willing and able to realize when the client/student has passed beyond the bounds

of their (the teacher's) capacity to help. At this point, it seems important for a teacher to have access to someone with more advanced training.

Another related concern to the unfolding of spiritual experiences is whether options are available for a client/student once therapy/the MBI course has ended. Especially in the case where one has seen positive changes in one's life and wants to continue, does he or she possess sufficient resources to take the next step? Would the next step be more MBI courses (are there varying levels?) or would this mean that they would need to be referred to a religious (Buddhist-based?) organization? Especially in the case of a person who has undergone a particularly profound experience – whether apparently positive or negative – it seems essential for measures to be in place so that he or she is well looked after and has access to continued guidance from a qualified mentor; whether or not on-going practice can be obtained is important. Cullen echoes this concern: “one of many challenges facing all MBIs as programs mature and graduates proliferate is the offering of ongoing support for the deepening and continuation of practices begun in the secular setting of a mindfulness class.”<sup>58</sup> Within psychotherapy, similar concerns arise as to where a client can turn for continued support and practice should he or she want or need it.

To summarize briefly, recognizing that “spiritual/religious experiences” can happen in secular mindfulness environments, it is essential to have properly trained teachers in place to provide experienced guidance. However, such a situation suggests that “mindfulness” practice in fact contains an inherently religious dimension and thus is not a purely secular enterprise. What is the relation between the secular context of mindfulness-based practices and the extensive psychotherapeutic and religious guidance that may become necessary?

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<sup>58</sup> Cullen, 6.

#### **Point 4. Issues of Teaching Certification: Who Is Doing the Teaching and Are They Prepared/Capable of Leading Students Well?**

Related to the foregoing are the issues of teaching and certification: should there be a uniform standard and what are the qualifications for becoming a teacher? Should a background in Buddhist practice be required or recommended?

A teacher is undoubtedly the pivotal link between the teaching material and making sure it is understood and practiced correctly by students. Kabat-Zinn addresses this: “the quality of MBSR as an intervention is only as good as the MBSR instructor and his or her understanding of what is required to deliver a truly mindfulness-based programme.”<sup>59</sup> With this in mind, constructing suitable measures or criteria for the development of one’s understanding as a teacher is essential. It appears that there are currently a wide array of views on the matter. The Institute for Meditation in Psychotherapy, for example, does its own workshops and certifications that are designed to educate therapists on mindfulness methodology and pedagogy. Because one is already a qualified therapist (usually holding a Ph.D) it seems that incorporating mindfulness during sessions is completely up to them; in other words, the fact that one is a professional psychotherapist trumps any specific requirements necessary for using mindfulness as treatment. Trainings would no doubt involve information about the practice of mindfulness, teaching it, case studies, and one would assume there would be guidance for therapists themselves in practicing the meditation and mindfulness techniques as well. Time-wise there seem to be a range of workshops lasting from a few hours to programs extending over months and even years. The range seems to vary widely. This raises the question of whether there should be a uniform standard for teaching mindfulness in psychotherapy. Should there be a minimum number of hours required for a psychotherapist to incorporate mindfulness during his or her sessions? The same goes for MBI’s. Questions about a certification system and who

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<sup>59</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 2.

would structure it immediately come to mind.

The issue of mindfulness' Buddhist origins again arises in the midst of these questions. Is there or should there be an incorporation of background information about religious praxis or the Buddhist tradition in mindfulness trainings? Ironically, even though the vast majority of MBI's and mindfulness classes separate mindfulness from Buddhism, a background in and solid knowledge of Buddhist practice appears to remain highly recommended. Jon Kabat-Zinn writes:

This all is to say that it can be hugely helpful to have a strong personal grounding in the Buddhadharma and its teachings, as suggested in the earlier sections. In fact, it is virtually essential and indispensable for teachers of MBSR and other mindfulness-based interventions. Yet little or none of it can be brought into the classroom except in essence. And if the essence is absent, then whatever one is doing or thinks one is doing, it is certainly not mindfulness-based in the way we understand the term.<sup>60</sup>

This creates a "catch-22": Possessing knowledge about Buddhism and a background in spiritual practice is foundationally important but its utilization must remain marginal. In terms of possessing a solid spiritual background, would this mean that receiving formal "certification" from a religious teacher is a reasonable requirement to ask for and, if so, what would be the parameters? This, of course, would inevitably result in the manifestation of altogether different arguments involved when the "religious" and "secular" are mixed – the problem Kabat-Zinn seems to be trying to avoid yet ends up highlighting. In either case, there certainly seems to be a blurring of the boundary between the two in mindfulness-based secular practice.

The main issues in this section involve questions of certification standards and the significance of instituting spiritual practice requirements.

### **Point 5. Are There Ramifications for the Field of Mindfulness as It Becomes Increasingly Co-opted by the Modern Western Marketplace?**

Some would contend that mindfulness is becoming commodified in the West.

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<sup>60</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 19.



Yoga is already “packaged” and marketed widely (10.3 billion dollars spent by US consumers in 2012 alone according to *Yoga Journal*), perhaps at the expense of its quality, integrity, and initial intentions. Many would argue that other eastern-originated spiritual traditions such as Buddhism are following in its wake:

That Buddhism is being commodified is plain to the naked eye. In the “spiritual goods” catalog *Mystic Trader*, a \$325 gold-leafed Buddha statue is offered with the recommendation, “If you ever desired to invest in a Buddha, here is a great opportunity.” Macintosh laptops and Patagonia parkas are advertised using the images of red-robed Tibetan monks. “Zen fashion” offers “a new level of inner peace,” and “tantric sex” spices up a boring sex life.<sup>61</sup>

Mindfulness seems to be on a similar path. As a practice closely associated with health, well-being, peace and tranquility (not to mention seen as trendy and “cool” through its Buddhist ties), the gate to exploitation by the modern capitalist economy appears wide open; mindfulness is indeed viewed as a commodity with incredible profit potential, both through its image and wide variety of programs. Workshops, courses, trainings, seminars, books, cds, and magazines are now widely available and advertised (the new magazine *Mindful* is perhaps the *Yoga Journal* of mindfulness).

Historically, Buddhist teachings were offered freely by teachers to students who were given the opportunity to make donations (a practice called *dāna*). This act of generosity was seen as supporting the teacher as well as being of central importance to one’s own life through the accruelement of positive karma. Western society operates under a very different mindset and many spiritual teachers have even made the case that eastern religious groups *cannot* maintain financial functionality on donations alone. Modern expressions of mindfulness practice, the majority seen as “secular,” almost always fit into the category of consumerism.

Some of the same issues about de-contextualization mentioned above apply: we see a religious practice floating free outside its original surrounding moral

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<sup>61</sup> David Patt, “Who’s ‘Zoomin’ Who? The Commodification of Buddhism in the American Marketplace,” *Tricycle*, <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/whos-zoomin-who-commodification-buddhism-american-marketplace>, (spring, 2014).

framework and value system. Understandably, some argue that selling a Buddhist-associated practice for large sums of money goes against Buddhism's original intentions of cultivating the qualities of generosity and non-attachment. Similar questions such as whether there is a corresponding "defilement" or loss of integrity to mindfulness programs or practice in this setting – whether taking place within a monetized capitalistic society will defile the teaching – are important to keep in mind. Mindfulness courses today range from a couple of hundred dollars to much more; certifications can be in the thousands.

Greed, desire, and attachment, in the Buddhist tradition, are seen as major "poisons" that a human being must work through in the course of his or her practice; the modern market thrives on these. According to David Patt of *Tricycle Magazine*,

The cessation of desire, says the Buddha, leads to peace. Consumerism is the exact opposite idea. It is based on the notion that material well-being is the highest goal (or the only goal) worth aspiring to: happiness comes from having. Value resides in the stuff you possess. This path to happiness requires an endless indulgence of desire.<sup>62</sup>

Can mindfulness operate in the midst of the modern co-option without serious corruption to its image and intentions? Especially as mindfulness programs become increasingly offered at companies, many would argue that their underlying intention is largely "greed-based" and that offering mindfulness programs to employees ultimately serves to satisfy and perpetuate this desire. According to Christopher Titmus,

Corporations often endorse ambition (a polite word for greed?), the pursuit of market share (another word for greed?), maximization of profits (another word for greed?) without any deep investigation into

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<sup>62</sup> Patt, "Who's 'Zoomin' Who? The Commodification of Buddhism in the American Marketplace," <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/whos-zoomin-who-commodification-buddhism-american-marketplace>.

such values while supporting a mindfulness programme.<sup>63</sup>

Google, for example, advertises its mindfulness seminars under the heading: “be mindful, the Google way.” But how much awareness is truly finding its way into these mega-companies’ policies?

We see an ironic twist within the phenomenon of marketing/advertising mindfulness, an industry by its very nature being closely connected to lies and delusion (another poison in Buddhism). When one sees mindfulness marketed and takes into account the “way that advertising creates a sense of lack and then offers to fulfill that lack,” it makes one seriously re-consider the underlying intentions.<sup>64</sup> The language used within advertising is purposefully misleading. For example, due to mindfulness’ positive reputation from scientific health research there is the tendency to advertise it as a “cure-all,” which is by no means the case. Wide use of Buddhist images, meditation, enlightenment, and spiritual figures or quotes – even for secular mindfulness - looks fantastic on a poster but whether the actual practice is truly being offered (and whether the teacher is genuine) is questionable.

Will the authenticity and integrity associated with mindfulness suffer in society’s mad rush to accrue huge profits from its sale? Are there drawbacks to its increasing co-option by the modern market and, if so, how will the field meet these challenges?

#### **Point 6. Is the Term “Mindfulness” Losing Its Meaning as It Is Applied in Increasingly Diverse and General Ways?**

Connected to the issue of commodification is the increasingly broad and general use of the term “mindfulness” Indeed, the term has become a buzzword closely associated with health and well being as well as carrying connotations of

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher Titmus, “The Buddha of Mindfulness: A Stress Destruction Programme,” <http://christophertitmus.org/blog/?p=1454> (11/13/2013).

<sup>64</sup> Payne, “The Anti-Ritual Stance of Buddhist Modernism and Psychotherapy.”

being “hip” and “cool” in its Western context from its association with Buddhism. In the process mindfulness has also taken on the form of acting as an umbrella term for a vast array of concepts; it is becoming difficult to hone in on what “mindfulness” actually refers to. Some would argue that it has become an empty, meaningless category that can be applied to almost anything (often with the purpose of arousing attention or increasing revenues).

When the term mindfulness is applied without discretion it is misleading; we see a wide array of uses. As mentioned above, there is a broad category in which people and businesses use it vaguely as a marketing tool (sometimes having nothing to do with mindfulness whatsoever) to increase sales. Other times it is used simply to refer to “taking care of” or “being careful” – I know of people who are starting a “Mindful Mowers” and “Mindful Café” business, for example. Their intention is sincere, they want to do a good job and communicate this quality to their audiences, but there is very little to do with actual “mindfulness practice” as enunciated in its original Buddhist historical context. The word is now used pervasively in American society, much of it through advertising. Another category of use of the term “mindfulness,” perhaps most relevant to this paper, is the labeling of a wide range of functions or qualities that are aspects of Buddhist-originated mindfulness practice but which could be labeled more specifically. Examples include *concentration, focus, attending, noticing, being present, awareness, contemplation, acceptance*, etc. These are all qualities related to functional mindfulness practice as defined by MBI and MBSR-related practices, but “mindfulness” as an umbrella term is both vague and carries an inviting cachet. Cullen speaks on this blurring of the term:

This emergent phenomenon [mindfulness-based programs] is both promising and perilous as it is increasingly difficult to gauge, not only the quality and integrity of the program, but whether or not the content has anything to do with mindfulness, let alone which definition of mindfulness is operationally applied in and philosophically guiding the curriculum.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Cullen, 1.

As mindfulness programs proliferate, the problem of definition and defining authority only deepens. We have only noted a handful of definitions, such as those from Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh; those derived from Kabat-Zinn's operational definition: "the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally"; definitions in psychotherapy, such as from the *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy* (written by the founders of IMP): "awareness of present experience with acceptance."<sup>66</sup> Oftentimes, no clear definition is actually given, such as found in marketing usage. Because the term is used pervasively, it is often hard to tell what the term means. Is the "mindfulness" being addressed connected to the mindfulness practice based in its historical origins in Buddhism or not? Does it work towards achieving similar goals? As the term becomes increasingly nebulous it becomes further removed from its original meanings and intentions.

This vagueness becomes all the more significant when mindfulness practice is measured in scientific studies. With the term often functioning in such a broad way for a wide array of concepts, questions can arise as to whether it is indeed the effects of mindfulness practice that are being measured. Is a particular study measuring Buddhist-originated *mindfulness practice* or simply referring to *concentration, acceptance, or paying attention*? Related to this is the potential for scientists or scholars to describe their own research as falling within the category of mindfulness due to its growing popularity and trendiness. For example, researching "*paying attention*" would no doubt attract less attention than research incorporating the term "mindfulness." Due to the popularity of mindfulness research, a scientist measuring a certain isolate component may nonetheless feel the urge to present their material under the heading of "mindfulness."

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<sup>66</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 11.

## **Point 7. Are There Risks Involved With Using Mindfulness Practice in Corporate, Governmental, or Military Institutions?**

This final point addresses mindfulness practice within the sphere of corporations and non-profit institutions such as the government and military; it raises the question of whether there are drawbacks to teaching mindfulness in these environments and what a particular institution's underlying intentions may actually be. Examples of high profile companies offering mindfulness classes to their employees include Google, General Mills, Proctor & Gamble, and Monsanto, among others.<sup>67</sup> It is believed that offering mindfulness classes to busy employees provides resources for supporting increased relaxation and stress-coping skills alongside research-based health benefits associated with mindfulness practice. This sounds beneficial for employees; however, the big winners may actually be the corporations.

There are a number of reasons for why implementation of employee mindfulness programs support underlying company intentions. Two of the main ones are that it increases worker efficiency while at the same time limiting criticism towards the work setting and company policies. As some forms of research have highlighted, becoming less affected by stress while at the same time increasing one's ability to concentrate is a formula for increasing efficiency; the amount of time one is "on task" increases. This ultimately leads to higher worker productivity and profits for the company.

Perhaps a more surreptitious motive for mindfulness in the workplace is its inherent focus on the individual which serves to de-emphasize judgment of external – in this case, job - circumstances. As one is taught to observe thoughts and feelings non-judgmentally this transfers to outside situations as well which, some have argued, is a formula for their tacit acceptance. Within personal mindfulness practice, forms of judging or criticism are framed as "attachment" or "losing one's center."

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Stone, "Abusing the Buddha: How the US Army and Google Co-opt Mindfulness," *Salon*, [http://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/abusing\\_the\\_buddha\\_how\\_the\\_u\\_s\\_army\\_and\\_google\\_co\\_opt\\_mindfulness](http://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/abusing_the_buddha_how_the_u_s_army_and_google_co_opt_mindfulness), (3/17/2014).

Some have argued that companies can exploit this. Christopher Titmus, for example, states,

There is no available evidence to show that the mindfulness courses challenge the obsessive demands on management, staff, the competitive drive or the very products of a company. The most common definition of mindfulness, namely “the paying of attention to the present moment in a non-judgemental way” leaves individuals in the company grappling with their stress while ignoring the larger picture of corporate politics as expression of need for change may appear judgemental.<sup>68</sup>

Misunderstanding mindfulness as solely a passive, internal practice is a potential pitfall in contemporary society where standing up for social change is so important; a central piece to this is awareness of and speaking up about “unwholesome” actions and unfair policies of corporations and institutions. Some would indeed contend that it is the nature of company policy and intentions – to increase profits at whatever cost – that needs serious examination most. Loy also speaks to the workplace and how mindfulness can be misinterpreted to focus solely on individual “issues” while letting corporate social and ethical responsibility slide,

Up to now, the mindfulness movement has avoided any serious consideration of why stress is so pervasive in modern business institutions. Instead, corporations have jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon because it conveniently shifts the burden onto the individual employee: stress is framed as a personal problem, and mindfulness is offered as just the right medicine to help employees work more efficiently and calmly within toxic environments. Cloaked in an aura of care and humanity, mindfulness is refashioned into a safety valve, as a way to let off steam — a technique for coping with and adapting to the stresses and strains of corporate life.<sup>69</sup>

According to this view, the popular understanding of mindfulness as a solely individualized practice will need to be re-examined in order for it to encompass the larger sphere of institutional issues. If the classes emphasize ignoring this larger

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<sup>68</sup> Titmus, “The Buddha of Mindfulness. A Stress Destruction Programme,” <http://christopher.titmus.org/blog/?p=1454>.

<sup>69</sup> Loy and Purser, “Beyond McMindfulness,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness\\_b\\_3519289.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html).

picture, or a worker feels that he or she cannot criticize questionable company policies, then this is a problem. A nice example of the contradictory nature of corporate mindfulness is Google, which offers the mindfulness program “Search Inside Yourself.” This sounds fantastic as an employee well-being program both for health and creativity; however, how much company awareness is being applied to Google’s policies and intentions, which no doubt affect others? Many would argue, for example, that the shuttle system Google has built up throughout San Francisco to get employees to work is displacing large numbers of long-term residents. Rent in these shuttle station areas has increased by 20 percent and landlords are able to kick long-time tenants out on the street in exchange for wealthier ones. It begs the question, “how mindful is Google really being?” Recent protests at *Wisdom 2.0*, Google’s mindfulness seminar that showcases speakers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, by a group speaking against about the co-opting of San Francisco by major multinational corporations raise fundamental questions concerning what mindfulness practice should really be about.<sup>70</sup> Thus, there is a need to examine the potential contradiction of mindfulness classes offered to employees by ethically ambiguous institutions.

Another example of questionable intentions is the use of mindfulness by the government and military. On the one hand, mindfulness-based practices may be of help to soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; on the other, the same practices may be used to train soldiers for combat, to make “more effective killers.”<sup>71</sup> We continue to return to the question of whether using mindfulness outside of an ethical framework is viable and safe. Wide incorporation of mindfulness in the military holds the potential to increase world suffering rather than alleviate it. Furthermore, if mindfulness includes social awareness, then one can argue that being “mindful” about the government and its military includes questioning policies which keep our country at war. Again we see the problem of incorporating mindfulness for the individual but not necessarily for the institution.

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<sup>70</sup> Stone, “Abusing the Buddha: How the US Army and Google Co-opt Mindfulness,” [http://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/abusing\\_the\\_buddha\\_how\\_the\\_u\\_s\\_army\\_and\\_google\\_co\\_opt\\_mindfulness/](http://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/abusing_the_buddha_how_the_u_s_army_and_google_co_opt_mindfulness/).

<sup>71</sup> Loy and Purser, “Beyond McMindfulness,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness\\_b\\_3519289.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html).



According to Titmus, “the discourse on mindfulness of the Buddha directs practitioners to search the inner AND the outer (such as the policies of a company [or institution]) from the standpoint of the truth of a situation.”<sup>72</sup>

Do mindfulness classes held in institutional settings carry risks? Issues such as underlying intentions, the repression of criticism by employees, and whether an institution is “being mindful” of its own policies highlight a wide range of concerning issues. Loy presents his critical opinion to these worries: “Mindfulness training has wide appeal because it has become a trendy method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals.” Bringing greater awareness to these developing concerns is undoubtedly an essential step for the burgeoning field of mindfulness.

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<sup>72</sup> Titmus, “The Buddha of Mindfulness. A Stress Destruction Programme,” <http://christophertitmus.org/blog/?p=1454>.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

This thesis began with an examination of mindfulness practice within the context of Buddhism (“Chapter II”). We looked at how it is expressed differently within the Theravada and Zen lineages, both linguistically and practically, but that the underlying theme remains: mindfulness is one of many supporting components (Buddhist doctrine, psychology, morality, complementary practices, etc.) which function collectively as a cause for awakening.

Building on this basic understanding of the practice of mindfulness within the Buddhist context, “Chapter III” went on to survey two major expressions of mindfulness practice in the West today: mindfulness in the field of psychotherapy and the MBSR program. In psychotherapy we saw how mindfulness is implemented as treatment for clients, and how the therapist him or herself can also utilize it to support therapy; overarching Buddhist psychological themes are incorporated as well at times depending on the therapist (this paper focused largely on the work of Mark Epstein). In MBSR we saw a strictly secular expression of mindfulness practice aimed at improving health and well-being through an 8-week course centered around stress reduction. Students are encouraged to practice different techniques, both formal and informal, daily in order to cultivate stress-coping skills and a greater capacity for awareness of their thoughts and feelings. This short sampling of two major forms of mindfulness practice is suggestive of the breadth and diversity found within the field of mindfulness today. One gets a clear sense of how mindfulness in politics, prisons, schools, sports, nutrition, parenting, the military, companies, and so on, would potentially take on altogether new and distinct flavors.

Moving forward with the framework provided by the earlier sections, “Chapter IV” highlighted important questions and potential limitations. We examined seven broad categories of questions relevant for the field to address as it continues to grow and develop. No doubt there is tremendous possibility for positive transformation through mindfulness practice; however, at the same time, the potential for dilution, exploitation, and the perpetuation of suffering does indeed

exist. Serious questions remain. For these reasons it is important to maintain a continuous dialogue with regard to the above issues. As with many things, it is through open discussion of alternative views that successful, positive developments may result.

I see this thesis as an opportunity to open up further themes and questions in the field's growing mountain of books, research studies, and critiques and am grateful to have been given the chance to learn so much along the way. It has added a different dimension and necessary balance to my years of Zen practice in Japan. As the dialogue between Buddhism/mindfulness and Western society continues to unfold it is exciting to imagine the possibilities.

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